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ABSTRACT

Strategies for administrators who deal with community criticism of school change are provided in this handbook. Chapter 1 explains the need for a comprehensive communications strategy and a communications team. Chapter 2 describes ways to build support with various constituencies, including how to gather information about different groups' concerns and how to identify opinion leaders. The third chapter discusses how to talk plainly about school restructuring, including a list of "red flag" terms and commonly asked questions. Different formats for effective communication are described in chapter 4. The fifth chapter offers guidelines for working with the media to distribute information. Chapter 6 provides suggestions for responding to three specific attack strategies. The final chapter concludes that even if no organized opposition to school change exists, educators must communicate effectively and democratically. Without public understanding and support, restructuring efforts will be difficult, if not impossible, to initiate and maintain. One figure and a list of 15 resources are included. (LMI)

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Marjorie Ledell and Arleen Arnsparger

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU IF:

_____ More and more people in your community are expressing concerns about programs, projects, and other initiatives to improve student learning.

_____ School board meetings are drawing more people complaining about the curriculum, instruction, testing, health education, or objectionable books.

_____ School and central administration staff are spending significantly more time on the phone or meeting with people who have concerns about the school.

_____ School and central administration staff are receiving many more requests for copies of materials, official records, informal reports of school committee meetings, and descriptions of the content of inservice programs.

_____ The number of people monitoring classrooms or asking for the names and addresses of teachers is rapidly increasing.

_____ Schools are receiving more requests from individuals or groups who want to use school newsletters, mailboxes, and other forms of communication to convey information.

_____ Teachers are receiving more requests to exempt students from attending certain classes or from reading specific curriculum materials.

_____ Materials are being circulated at school and district meetings and in school and church parking lots criticizing schools for focusing on one or all of the following: self-esteem, global education, secular humanism, gifted and talented programs, guided imagery, whole language,

cooperative learning, multi-age grouping of students, and multiculturalism.

_____ More and more parents are asking whether school changes will help or hurt their child's chances of going to college.

_____ The school or district is supported by tax dollars.

_____ The school district wants to be prepared for any of the above concerns.

If you have checked any of these statements, you need a strategy for building community understanding and support for your "restructuring" efforts. We define restructuring as "making significant changes to improve student learning," not as a specific set of ideas or an educational philosophy. Specifically, this book will help you:

- Understand the need for a communications strategy rather than what some people might think of as a public relations "campaign" to "sell" what you're doing.
- Anticipate and respond to critics and pressure groups.
- Invite diverse opinions and ideas.
- Build support for change.
- Depend on the democratic process to help you improve education.

1
Developing a Communications Strategy

WHENEVER YOU MAKE CHANGES OR EVEN PROPOSE TO MAKE changes, some people become concerned. Accept this fact of life, and learn to patiently deal with it. We spend a lot of time working with people in schools, districts, and state education agencies whose restructuring efforts are criticized by people who do not understand the efforts or who have been excluded from the process of determining what those efforts should be. That is not to say that people will automatically agree with you once they understand what you're doing. Some people believe schools are fine just as they are. Others believe schools should reflect a particular set of values. Not everyone wants what you want in your schools.

The Importance of Good Communication

We have seen evidence in schools and districts around the country that communicating well and involving the community in restructuring efforts makes change less difficult for everyone. This book is designed to help you build bridges that will enable everyone to work together on behalf of all students.

As an advocate of restructuring, you are tackling a big job. You are taking the lead in making changes that will help all children learn more and better. Do not wait until people start criticizing your restructuring efforts to think about communication. Begin immediately to think about how to

include people in decisions about school change. One of the most important steps to take before becoming involved in school change is to develop a communications strategy that will help you reach out to people. In this way, you will immediately begin to build support and advocacy for your efforts.

It doesn't matter how effective you believe your efforts in the classroom or the boardroom are. Unless you communicate clearly with a representative cross-section of people, you may quickly face skepticism and opposition and find little support for your initiatives.

People are accustomed to thinking about communication as a one-way effort focused on presenting an idea and getting others to "buy in," but that way of communicating is not enough. More and more people expect to have a voice in matters that affect their lives. True two-way communication gives others a voice; it is a conversation, a balance of listening to what is important to others and presenting ideas in ways that respond to people's concerns. Developing a communications strategy is a good way to establish your commitment to this type of communication.

Your communications strategy for restructuring should be driven by the desire to maintain honest, open dialogue and even debate about what best meets students' needs. Remember that you, like everyone else, contribute only a part of the final product. As you work with people in the community, the changes you want in your schools will begin to look different as they begin to reflect the ideas of many people with diverse opinions. This new blend of ideas is a strength, because restructuring schools requires a broad base of understanding and support from many people: parents, teachers, students, administrators, school board members, businesspeople, taxpayers, civic and religious leaders, legislators, and others in the community. As you begin, keep in mind that *everyone's role in restructuring includes being an effective communicator.*

Without a communications strategy, you will soon see your work become fragmented; individuals will easily lose sight of common goals. You will become frustrated that your efforts to communicate are not effective. A strategy keeps everyone focused on the goal of restructuring—

improving student learning—and on how communication advances that goal.

A comprehensive communications strategy for a state, district, or school involved in restructuring is designed to do several things:

- Involve a broad range of people in discussions about the future direction of the school or district.
- Build understanding and support for restructuring.
- Develop the abilities of those involved to communicate clearly and concisely about the restructuring efforts.
- Help those involved anticipate, illuminate, and respond to questions and concerns about restructuring.
- Build in regular reporting of the school's progress in reaching the goal of improved student achievement.

Even if you are already in the midst of controversy, developing a communications strategy is a vital step for you to take. Many educators have found that putting out brush fires does little to prevent new ones from igniting, so while you are dealing with the problems at hand, you should be developing and carrying out your strategy to build support for both current and future restructuring efforts. All school districts should have public relations staff or should seek assistance on communications from outside the organization.

The Communications Team

Begin by putting together a communications team composed of the people who will take the lead in the communications effort and map out your strategy. This team of three to five people could include a teacher, a principal, another school or district employee, a parent, a businessperson with communications expertise, a student, and a district-level community relations person, if one is available. Some schools and districts supplement their public relations efforts with help from a local university or business willing to donate a public relations staff person's time to work with the school's communications team.

The team will design a strategy and a plan for carrying out that strategy. But remember, everyone's role in restructuring includes being an effective communicator. The job of communicating well should not be shouldered by the communications team alone.

2
Building Support

Why Do Schools Need Support?

Without support from diverse groups of people inside and outside the school, restructuring efforts will slow—and perhaps even stop. It is critical to the success of any restructuring effort to include as many people as possible in discussions about changes in the schools. Your goal is not to get people to endorse the changes *you* want, but to reach agreement within your school community about what will best meet the needs of all children, and then move forward *together* to create the agreed-upon learning environment.

Many people in the community have a stake in the education of our young people, so it's not surprising that they want a voice in what happens in the schools. They believe the schools should not make instructional changes without seriously considering the opinions of parents and other community members. You will find that people who are not informed about what is happening in their local schools—or who perceive that they are being excluded from serious discussions about school matters—are potential targets of misinformation from opponents of school reform.

People who work in your school and district are also vulnerable to misinformation if they are not included in the process of change. Teachers, administrators, and other staff members who are not part of the core group working on restructuring efforts can become alienated and highly critical of proposed changes and of the individuals making the changes. They feel left out and don't have knowledge or understanding of the proposed changes. As a result, they will often enlist the support of others to actively oppose the

restructuring process and make life difficult for those who are involved. Offering everyone in the school an opportunity to publicly discuss the school's future is important, even if everyone will not be involved in the initial implementation of the changes.

Whose Support Do You Need?

To begin building support, make a list of everyone you believe will want to be involved in school reform or who might have questions or concerns about the reform efforts. The list should include, but not be limited to:

- Teachers
- Principals
- Superintendents
- Other school staff
- Other school and district administrators
- School board members
- Students
- Parents of both preschool children and school-age children
- School booster clubs
- Social service agencies
- Local institutes of higher education
- Businesspeople
- Senior citizens
- Legislators
- City government officials
- Religious leaders
- Preschool providers
- Other taxpayers

Notice that some of these groups are inside the school, others are outside the school, and some can be considered both inside and outside the school. Both types of groups are equally important.

Once the list is complete, the communications team must determine the order in which groups will be contacted. The initial contact should be in person. One-to-one contact is best, but meeting with small groups of five to eight people is acceptable too. The following three questions will help in making this decision:

- Who is most affected by the changes being considered in the schools?
- Who will see themselves as having the most to lose or gain by the changes?
- Who is most likely to influence public opinion?

The groups identified in your answers to these questions should be the first groups contacted.

The Importance of Listening

Listening to the concerns and questions of members of the community may be the most important part of a communications strategy. In other words, to build support for school reform, you must learn what is important to various groups and individuals. This means setting up situations in which the concerns of individuals and groups within the community can be discussed—before any accouncements about proposed reforms. Effective ways of gathering such information include:

- **Surveys.** Formal and informal surveys seek the opinions of a number of people. Statistical reliability will depend on how the survey is conducted and the sample size. A state, district, or school system could conduct its own survey or have it done for them by an outside polling firm.
- **Community forums.** During community forums, community members come together to gather information, ask questions, and air concerns. The format should be devoted largely to listening to community concerns; however, you need to present enough information so people can have informed discussions and make reasoned decisions.

• **One-to-one meetings.** In one-to-one meetings, leaders of business and parent groups, legislators, and other key opinion leaders are invited to meet informally with someone who is knowledgeable about the school's restructuring efforts.

• **Focus groups.** A focus group is a vehicle for bringing together a variety of people to find out what they believe about education and what they want for students. A focus group can also help provide information about what groups and individuals see as barriers to improving education, how barriers can be overcome, and who is responsible for the barriers. People can be divided into focus groups by their area of interest—for example, parents, business leaders, legislators, and so on.

Genuine listening doesn't mean giving lip service to concerns and then going about "business as usual." It involves asking questions to ensure that concerns are truly understood, and it often requires reading between the lines and interpreting what a question might really mean. For example, a mother who asks about a plan to group children in multi-age classrooms might really be concerned that her young child will be bullied by older children or made to feel "dumb" in a classroom that includes children with a wide range of knowledge and ability.

Genuine listening also doesn't mean doing everything you hear people telling you to do. Failure to take concerns seriously and address them constructively, however, will threaten the success of school reform efforts. You don't want to set up false expectations, so be sure to clarify at every opportunity the purpose and desired outcome of the dialogue. Be sure also to let people know where the decision-making authority lies, how their concerns will be addressed and by whom, and the time lines for making decisions. In this way, you can create a balance between responding to community concerns and maintaining a clear focus on restructuring efforts.

Identifying Opinion Leaders

Successful restructuring depends on support and participation from many groups. The individuals who make

up these groups form opinions about issues in many ways—through information from media such as television, newspapers, trade publications, and organization newsletters. People also form opinions by listening to "opinion leaders."

Opinion leaders often serve as key sources of information about issues and, in an informal sense, frame issues for discussion, debate, and action. Some opinion leaders are easily identified by their positions in the community, for example, in the PTA and civic organizations. Others may be less visible: board members of nonprofit foundations, political campaign managers, fellow workers, church and synagogue members, or even neighbors. All are influential and usually share identifiable characteristics:

- They are interested in important issues, including education.
- They are well informed about issues.
- They are avid consumers of information in almost any form—newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio.
- They are quick to try out new ideas and, if the benefit is apparent, to accept and recommend the ideas to others.
- They are good organizers who can get other people to take action.
- They read publications concerning their special areas of interest.

The most effective way to identify opinion leaders is to make note of those people who frequently attend civic meetings, ask insightful questions, are leaders or members of community or education groups (even those outside your school community or district), volunteer to help with school activities, request information, assume leadership positions in the school, and generally display an interest in, and knowledge of, the changes made in schools. It is immensely important to develop a list of opinion leaders and make a special effort to keep them informed and listen to their concerns and ideas through all phases of school reform efforts.

Cultivating Third-Party Advocates

Third-party advocates are people who are not part of the local education system and do not directly benefit from specific school reform efforts, but are willing to give their support publicly for these reforms. Frequently, they are also opinion leaders. Third-party advocates have strong credibility with particular audiences who trust and admire them. For instance, star athletes who endorse products are third-party advocates. Advertisers realize that many of us will buy products endorsed by people we admire and trust. The strategy works the same way in schools. With a solid communications plan as a foundation, many schools have found that the simple endorsement of a third-party advocate helped solidify support for their school restructuring efforts.

Developing Business-Education Partnerships

Good working relationships with businesses benefit school restructuring efforts for a variety of reasons. Businesses can contribute ideas for curriculum, instruction, and systems management, articulate the need and means for restructuring (advocacy), and serve as a source of specialized services. Remember that businesses generally want to do more than simply fund your efforts: they want to be involved in making decisions. When you approach businesses for assistance, keep the following points in mind:

- Tailor the request to the nature of the business, not to the amount of money the business makes. For example, ask for a contribution of technical expertise from a software company.
- Tie each request and relationship to a specific school reform initiative.
- Seek assistance that clearly helps increase student achievement and enhances the business community's image. Monitor results and be generous with praise and recognition. Avoid misunderstandings on both sides by developing written guidelines for business contributions.

Contributions from businesses might include:

- Internships, apprenticeships, specialized training, or sabbaticals for students, teachers, and administrators.
- Incentives and flexible work hours to encourage employees to take part in school reform efforts.
- Formal recognition of teachers and students.
- Opportunities for teachers and students to work outside the community or state, or even outside the country.
- Community forums for business and education advocates, policymakers, and lobbyists to discuss and debate education issues.
- Advice on how to shift from a bureaucratic organization to one that is more collaborative.

Involving Higher Education

When building support for school reform, remember that institutions of higher education have an intense interest in the students who will soon be coming through their doors. If institutions of higher education do not support reform efforts, students and parents probably won't either. State efforts to restructure the education system need to recognize that higher education is part of the system and must be included in any discussion of reform. Those involved in local restructuring efforts should be sure to communicate with trade schools, colleges, and universities through letters, publications, and site visits about course requirements and graduation requirements. Higher education officials should be involved as much as possible in helping local reform efforts succeed.

Including Policymakers

Policymakers are very influential in initiating, supporting, and sustaining school reform. They include local school board members, who are charged with and are accountable for student learning, and state legislators, who determine the state's share of funding for schools. Without policy support, teachers, principals, and other administrators do not have the encouragement, incentive,

or money to change curriculum, instruction, and assessment to improve student learning.

Moreover, when criticism of school reform surfaces, it frequently is aimed first at school board members and then at legislators. Both groups must know what is going on if they are to be able to defend and endorse your efforts. Policymakers must not only be informed, they must prepare themselves to have the courage to speak out in the face of criticism. The best preparation is having complete and clear information about the restructuring efforts.

Policymakers can support school reform by:

1. **Establishing a vision** of what students in the state or district should know and be able to do and of how the education system should work.

2. **Reviewing existing policies** to determine how they aid or hinder reaching the vision and realigning policy where necessary. They can also develop a policy for dealing with criticism, including provisions for allowing people to forgo participation in certain reform efforts.

3. **Serving as key communicators** for efforts to improve student learning.

4. **Sharing accountability** for the success or failure of school reform efforts.

Electing School Board Members and State Legislators

Because policymakers' support is essential to restructuring efforts, the community needs to determine whether canididates for the school board and state legislature understand and support education reform. Although support of the broad vision of reform is necessary, there is room for a range of views on strategies, priorities, financing, and so on. A diversity of views is valued and respected. You will find, however, that strong critics of school change often seek to elect school board members who agree with their particular points of view. Thus, during elections, open forums can help voters learn about the candidates' opinions and priorities for education. Candidates and policymakers should be able to answer questions such as these:

1. Should school board members be involved in the day-to-day administrative decision making of the school district? Why? Why not?

2. How can elected officials make sure the greater good for the most people is served when some people speak loudly and often claim to speak for the majority?

3. What criteria and process should be used to choose or ban curricular materials?

4. Should sex education be taught in public schools? Why? Why not?

5. How do you describe your position on the separation of church and state?

6. Do you believe there are any items that should be added to or deleted from the current curriculum in your school district?

7. Do you think standardized tests adequately show what students know and are able to do?

8. In these times of higher expectations for students and school employees and decreasing funding for education, what can you do to continue to press for progress?

9. Where could the district spend less money? Where could it spend more money?

10. Should the school or district eliminate or reduce some employees and services?

11. Do you believe more education dollars should go to early childhood education? Why or why not?

12. Are you familiar with open meetings and open records laws? Do you agree with them?

13. Do you think the community is involved enough in decision making in the schools?

14. Do you have plans to run again for this office whether you're elected or not?

15. Do you plan to run for any other public office?

By involving policymakers and holding them accountable, you will help frame important discussions and debates about education issues.

3
Talking About Restructuring

THERE'S NOTHING MYSTICAL OR MYSTERIOUS ABOUT RESTRUCTURING. But to people trying to understand the changes being made in schools, the language of restructuring—the jargon—often gets in the way. Jargon is the terminology belonging to a specific field. It is generally understood by people who work in that field every day, but may sound like gibberish to outsiders. For example, "whole language" and "integrated learning" have precise meanings for educators, but many parents think these ideas are competing with rather than supporting traditional basic learning. Critics of school change often redefine jargon in their own words, usually distorting the actual meaning of the terms. Figure 3.1 on pages 16 and 17 shows the educators' definition and the critics' definition of some of the most common educational jargon—what we call "red flag" terms. The critics' definitions were taken from publications produced by opponents of restructuring and individuals opposed to specific programs and educational philosophies.

A conversation about restructuring should always focus on results, not on the means used to reach those results. Changing assessment procedures or adopting new classroom structures are merely means to an end. First, describe the results you're after, then show how specific changes will lead to even better results. Improved student achievement must be seen and communicated as necessary and as the primary purpose of restructuring.

When you talk about restructuring, your goal is to help others understand, so they will feel comfortable with changes being made in the schools and participate in the

process of improving schools. If you confuse people with language they do not understand, you will not accomplish your goal. In fact, you will probably alienate the very people whose support and understanding you need. As we have seen in school districts across the United States where ambitious restructuring efforts are under way, people who ask relatively simple questions and receive what they believe to be inadequate answers quickly become angry and hostile.

Commonly Asked Questions About Restructuring

Here are some of the most commonly asked questions about restructuring and possible answers to them. Of course, you will need to describe your efforts in language you find comfortable. Remember, however, to always speak plainly and be concise.

1. What is restructuring?

Many schools have defined restructuring as an effort to improve teaching, learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment so *all* students will:

- Take more initiative and responsibility for their own learning, not just passively absorb information.
- Learn to identify and solve problems, find and analyze information, apply knowledge and skills, develop creativity, and work individually and with others.
- Value hard work, achievement, honesty, integrity, respect, and compassion for others, and learn the importance of American freedom and its attendant responsibilities.
- Find their heritage, culture, and individuality respected and addressed in their learning.
- Have opportunities to reach their potential.

Of course, other schools and districts will develop their own unique definitions.

Figure 3.1
Red Flag Terms

	Educators' Definition	Critics' Definition
Cooperative learning	Small groups of students working together in activities set up by the teacher to study, discuss subject matter, solve problems, or complete projects. The teacher moves about the classroom, monitoring the activity and progress of each group and working with students as needed.	Kids teaching other kids with no active role for the teacher.
Critical thinking	Developing the capacity to think in a thoughtful, discerning way, to solve problems, analyze data, and recall and use information.	Learning to criticize your parents and question family values.
Experimental program	An innovative program that has been or is in the process of being studied.	Anything that doesn't have hard data and airtight guarantees to support it.
Global education	Learning about those problems and issues that cut across national boundaries, and about the interconnectedness of systems—ecological, cultural, economic, political, and technological. Global education involves perspective taking—seeing things through the eyes and minds of others—and it means the realization that while individuals and groups may view life differently, they also have common needs and wants (Tye 1990).	An attempt to eliminate patriotism.
Mastery learning	A teaching approach that emphasizes the mastery of well-defined tasks. Teachers break knowledge and skills into steps or units, giving students a clear description of what they are expected to do and how their success will be measured. Mastery is not measured through a one-time-only test; students have opportunities to work with concepts and correct errors.	Teaching all children one limited task, then making sure all of them can master the task and pass a test on it.
Outcome-based education	Identifying what graduates should know and be able to do to succeed in the future, then redesigning teaching, learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to help all students reach these goals. Rather than measuring student progress simply by the amount of time students have spent in a course, outcome-based education is directed toward measuring real student achievement.	Teaching students to pass the test.

Promoting self-esteem	Helping students feel good about themselves by consciously giving them positive, encouraging attention; making them aware of their strengths; and helping them develop the ability to take responsibility for their own learning.	Allowing educators who are not licensed to practice psychiatry or psychology (especially teachers) to use behavior modification therapy to persuade students to conform to certain standards.
School-based management/shared decision making	Allowing a school greater autonomy through some combination of site budgetary control and relief from constraining rules and regulations and through sharing with teachers—and sometimes parents, students, and other community members—the authority to make the many decisions that affect students (David 1989).	A set-up that gives principals and teachers too much control and parents very little. The school board becomes irrelevant, and no one is truly accountable.
Teacher-as-coach	The teacher helps students take the initiative to become actively involved in their own learning.	The teacher becomes a discussion group leader instead of fulfilling the appropriate role of the classroom authority figure.
Teaching decision-making skills	Helping children make use of their innate ability to think, to choose, and to act wisely (Harmin 1990, p. 3) by teaching them skills for making important decisions—for example, gathering relevant information, determining the criteria important to a good decision, and weighing the alternatives.	Learning that it's okay to take drugs instead of being taught outright that it's wrong and illegal. (There's no need for decision making to be taught, because right and wrong are absolutes.)
Whole language	A language arts program based on the idea that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are natural and interrelated processes learned in similar ways. Typically, students learn to read and write primarily by comprehending words in context, rather than by sounding out letters and syllables, though words are sometimes sounded out. Students discuss what they're reading, try many kinds of writing, and read their compositions to their classmates. A whole-language program supports the integrated development of the skills necessary for literacy	Learning to look, see, guess—attempting to learn to read without phonics and traditional grammatical usage and form.

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Restructuring also means making more effective use of time, space, money, and people. It is helpful for teachers, students, parents, businesspeople, administrators, board of education members, state education officials, legislators, and governors to work together to identify the best ways to increase student achievement.

The actual process of restructuring varies widely, depending on how individual schools, districts, states, or postsecondary institutions decide to change education at their respective levels. Restructuring does *not* mean standardizing the education process. On the contrary, it means each school, district, or state develops a vision and corresponding action plan best suited to its location.

2. Does restructuring change only teaching and learning, or does it also suggest ways to change laws, policies, regulations, and administrative practices?

Within the many and varied approaches to restructuring, some policymakers at the state, district, and school level are changing laws, policies, regulations, and administrative practices. For example, many local school boards have adopted policies that call for increased graduation requirements, additional forms of testing, and site-based councils to share decision making about curriculum, instruction, budgets, and some personnel matters.

3. I want to know what differences we'll see in classrooms that are restructuring. Do teachers concentrate on teaching students important facts, knowledge, and skills expected in the workplace?

In most restructuring classrooms, students learn essential knowledge and skills in important areas. They use courses of study designed around a variety of curricular materials, not just one or two textbooks. Curricular materials might include textbooks, news clippings, videos, a list of readily available library resources, and technology databases networked to national and international sources. Educators work with representatives from student, parent, business, and community groups to develop a curriculum that will prepare students for the world they will live in—both the workplace and society.

Teachers may spend less time instructing in a lecture format and more time guiding study and discussion among small groups of students. They might encourage students to learn and to take responsibility for their own learning. This new role allows the teacher to focus more on the individual students and their potential. It also helps the students develop the learning skills they will need to use throughout their lives.

4. Are fewer subjects taught in a restructured school?

Not necessarily. Subjects are, however, often tied to other subject areas. For example, in history, students must use good language skills to demonstrate their understanding of the causes of world conflict, so there is a recognized connection between English and history.

5. What about extracurricular activities and vocational education in a restructured school?

Individual schools and school districts determine the vocational education courses and extracurricular activities appropriate for their schools. Typically, students and school communities continue such programs. In some restructured districts, vocational education is more closely tied with academic courses.

6. Does restructuring necessarily mean school-based decision making or site-based management?

It often does. One of the basic guidelines of restructuring is encouraging those closest to the students to make decisions in a democratic way while also holding themselves and others accountable for results. Administrators, teachers, students, parents, businesspeople, and other citizens have a voice in school decisions. Typically, shared decision making means the district's central office staff share their expertise and serve in an advisory role. However, local school boards are still legally responsible for ensuring a high-quality education in a safe environment and for complying with state and federal laws and regulations.

7. If schools are going to try to help all students reach their potential, won't they need a lot more money and staffing?

There is a need to increase spending in some areas; however, in some cases reallocation of existing resources can offset a portion of the need for more money. And working relationships with the business community have provided many schools with both expertise and funding.

The need for additional staff varies widely, depending on decisions made about teacher assignments, scheduling, and curriculum. The time and cost needed for teacher planning time, inservice training, and professional development to prepare teachers and other staff for new roles in the school also affect budgets.

8. Can you prove that restructuring will improve student achievement?

Not conclusively. There are, however, some indicators of improved student achievement in restructured schools, such as higher graduation rates, better attendance, fewer discipline problems, more students going on to higher education, more comments about improved learning from students and parents, and more parents, students, and community members involved in school activities.

Right now, we don't have reliable ways to measure students' improvements in learning. Traditional standardized achievement tests are inadequate measures of thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, creativity, communication skills, and teamwork. We need new tests and demonstrations of applied knowledge and learned skills to complement these traditional measures. We may ask each student to begin building a portfolio, which is a collection of representative work over a period of time, probably a semester or a year.

The preliminary indicators of success mentioned earlier combined with the enthusiastic support of key educators, leading businesses, and many policymakers are sound reasons to have confidence that restructuring will increasingly be recognized as a successful approach to improving student achievement.

Showing Progress

It is imperative to measure and communicate the progress of school reform efforts. This isn't always easy. One of the biggest and most well-deserved criticisms of school reform efforts is that, because they take time, educators cannot yet prove that they work. Everyone—parents, school board members, legislators, the media, businesspeople—wants evidence that the changes being made are producing the desired results. Here are some ways to show the progress you're making:

- Improvement in test scores
- Statistics about behavioral changes such as dropout rates, attendance rates, disciplinary actions, and so on
- Information about increased parental, business, and community involvement
- Anecdotal information from teachers, students, administrators, and parents
- Information about interagency agreements and projects (social agencies, libraries, recreation districts, higher education institutions)
- Survey results
- Reallocation of resources

When gathering information to illustrate progress, think about what types of information would best serve the various groups in the community. For example, while parents might be interested in information about student learning, businesses might be interested in information about decreases in dropout or truancy rates. Collecting a wide variety of information about the effects of school reform efforts will help meet the needs of specific groups.

4
Communicating Effectively

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO REACH PEOPLE WITH INFORMATION ABOUT your school and district. Remember: your goal is to give information *and* provide opportunities for people to share their interests and concerns with you. There are various ways to do both. No matter what the setting, you want to give people easy-to-understand information that answers their basic questions. And you want to provide information in various ways.

Face-to-Face Conversations

Whether you're dealing with someone critical of your school restructuring efforts or just seeking initial information, the best way to reach a common understanding is through face-to-face conversations. This is especially true inside your school or district. Don't underestimate the importance of developing understanding and support among your colleagues. The greatest resistance to organizational change often comes from within.

Informal meetings, group breakfasts or lunches, coffee breaks, group "rap" sessions, or question-and-answer sessions with school officials are among the most widely used forms of face-to-face communication. These are also the best opportunities for you to listen and find out what concerns people have about restructuring and what they want and need from the education system.

Although less structured than many other means of communication, face-to-face communication should be deliberate and planned. Whom do you want to reach? What are they interested in knowing? What do you want to say?

Though the thought of face-to-face communication with the thousands of people in the community may seem overwhelming, you will find that such communication actually saves time in the long run. In addition, as you develop third-party advocates and other knowledgeable communicators, you will have an ever-increasing number of people to carry the load.

Letters and Memos

Although letters and memos don't take the place of conversations, they are an important and personal approach to providing information, following up on previous conversations, and responding to concerns. Here are some general guidelines for writing letters and memos:

- **Use a "hook" in your opening paragraph**, an attention-getting statement or question. Grab your reader and motivate him to read on. Start with a statement or question that addresses the reader's biggest concern or offers something that will benefit each individual.
- **Write in a conversational tone**, using common language. Visualize the reader and develop a "you-me" relationship with him.
- **Use short words, short sentences, and bullets** to highlight main points.
- **Invite your reader to take a specific action** by an established deadline.

Materials

Your materials should explain your restructuring efforts in a simple, concise way. Though you will want to tailor information for specific audiences, some basic pieces are useful for everyone:

- **Fact sheet.** A one-page fact sheet provides basic demographic information about your school or district, dropout rates, attendance, the percentage of students going on to college, a philosophy or mission statement, a brief

description of current restructuring efforts, and other pertinent information.

• **Brochure.** Still short and simple, a brochure offers a more colorful description of what makes your school special. It might contain several brief anecdotes or first-hand accounts that make your school restructuring effort come alive.

• **Newsletter.** A newsletter might contain current information about changes you're making, progress, articles from students and teachers about their experiences in a restructuring school, and a calendar of upcoming events.

• **Profile of your school.** A restructuring school often looks different from "traditional" schools. In a one- or two-page format, you should provide basic demographic information and a compelling description, in words and pictures, of how the school has changed and is changing and why. For example:

> At Logan Middle School, you will see students working together on one project in small groups. This approach more closely resembles the workplace environment where individuals benefit from one another's thinking and jointly arrive at conclusions. Every student has the opportunity to learn not only from the teacher, but also from others, thus expanding his or her ability to appreciate views expressed by others.

Also briefly include highlights of your school curriculum, instructional methods, assessments of teaching and learning, the names of committees, and how people can become involved.

• **Video.** A five- to seven-minute video showing the effects of school restructuring efforts in the classroom can be a wonderful informational tool. But don't leap into production! Producing a high-quality, effective video takes time, money, and the experience of video professionals. A poorly made video can do more to hurt your efforts than to help. Of course, you can always incorporate video projects into student work and share them with community members to show how students benefit from restructuring.

Together, these methods will help you provide both information about restructuring and opportunities for sharing ideas about restructuring. Remember not to rely too heavily on any one method. For instance, face-to-face meetings may not be enough. Follow up with letters or memos to clarify what you discussed and agreed on in the meetings. These methods reinforce one another and help you build a stronger foundation for restructuring.

5
Working with the Media

THE MEDIA CAN BE A POWERFUL TOOL FOR INFORMING A LARGE, diverse audience. In general, there are three ways to work with the media:

1. Bring your story idea or issue to the media.
2. Contact the media to cover a specific event.
3. Respond to a reporter who wants to do a story about your reform efforts.

Critics frequently go directly to the media with their complaints about school restructuring. They make their case in letters to the editor or guest editorials, and they try to persuade reporters to be sympathetic to their point of view. By establishing a solid relationship with the media, you will be in a position to have the school's point of view heard and have an opportunity to respond quickly to specific allegations.

Some Basic Techniques

A basic media strategy is an important part of any school reform effort. Some districts have their public relations professionals take the lead in establishing sound relations with the media. They may even bring in an outside professional or ask a local university public relations department to work with them. Here are some basic techniques you can use to work more effectively with the media:

• **Develop a media list** containing the media outlets that reach important segments of the community. Periodically mail concise information about your

restructuring efforts to these reporters and editors. You should mail directly to education reporters, radio and TV assignment editors, newspaper editorial page editors, and city desk editors.

• **Send out news releases** to announce events, report on progress, and announce grants awarded to support your restructuring efforts.

• **Invite individual reporters to schools** that are in the process of restructuring, so they can see and better understand the changes taking place and talk with teachers, students, and parents involved in the effort.

• **Identify spokespersons** for the restructuring effort who can be called on for interviews.

• **Remember that people who work in the news business also live in your community** and have children in your schools. Invite them as parents and community members to participate in discussions about your restructuring efforts.

Specific Guidelines for Working with Reporters

Many people try to avoid the media for fear that reporters are looking for a negative story. Though some stories certainly develop out of controversy, most reporters are only looking for information to pass along to their readers, viewers, or listeners. When reporters understand the issues and have good information, they can naturally report more accurate stories. Although striving to communicate well with the media never guarantees "positive" media coverage, it does mean that reporting will probably be more objective. Here are some specific suggestions for working well with reporters:

• **Always take an informative, rather than defensive, position.** Present your information in a positive way.

• **Be a resource.** When you see a story about restructuring in other communities or a story about restructuring in general, call a reporter or TV station and offer your spokespersons for local-angle interviews.

• **Be sure your information is important.** Go to reporters only with information that might genuinely serve the public interest.

• **Be cooperative.** Provide information upon request. If you don't know the answer, say you'll get back to them immediately with information. Then do it.

• **Be honest.**

• **Honor deadlines.** Because a reporter's job is governed by tight deadlines, reporters appreciate your respecting their need to meet their deadlines. When a reporter calls for information, ask what the deadline for the story is.

• **Know the other side.** If people have been criticizing or voicing concerns about the school's restructuring efforts, find out exactly what their concerns are, so you can respond appropriately when reporters question you about their concerns.

• **Admit mistakes.** If something isn't going well, be honest about it. And be prepared to explain what you're doing to improve the situation.

Although reporters usually have a variety of questions, most relate to money and changes in policy. For example, reporters will frequently ask if the reform effort will:

• Increase the budget.

• Cause personnel reductions or reassignment.

• Require teachers to know more subject areas.

• Lead to difficulties with unions over such issues as salary, certification, and use of inservice education time.

• Affect students' prospects for being admitted to college.

• Result in brighter students being neglected in order to help disadvantaged students.

• Guarantee increased student achievement.

Of course, reporters will ask many other questions, but thinking through the answers to these critical few will help prepare a spokesperson for interviews with reporters.

About Controversy

Whether we like it or not, controversy interests the public. Because it is a reporter's job to cover those things that interest the public, any conflict in your schools will attract media attention. If you have a good relationship with reporters, you will find it easier to get through difficult times. And if you are regularly providing information that results in media coverage, you won't find yourself in the position of seeing only negative coverage in the media. As in all dealings with the media, when a controversial situation arises, be honest, accessible, and as helpful as possible.

6
What to Do When You're Under Attack

WHEN YOU'RE UNDER ATTACK, IT'S SOMETIMES HARD TO KEEP THINGS in perspective. You'll quickly discover the importance of having policies and answers to questions readily available. The experiences of many schools around the country show that it is a mistake to dig in your heels and expend all your resources and energy simply responding to accusations. Rather, this is the time to think clearly, sort out what the issues really are, and illuminate them publicly so more people can take part in discussion, debate, and decision making.

Focus on communicating your message and inviting dialogue rather than on responding to accusations with a point-by-point rebuttal. Accusations do not create an information base on which to conduct a debate.

Guidelines for Overcoming a Crisis

Sometimes, no matter what you do, things get out of hand, and an atmosphere of skepticism degenerates into alienation and organized opposition. If this happens, use the following guidelines to get through the crisis and back to your basic, solid communications strategy.

- **Make sure you are clear about the issues.** Don't respond to rumor or personal opinion. Gather available facts and any materials being circulated by critics of your efforts.

- **Don't overreact.** Take time to review the available information, and you may find that you can end the

controversy easily by having a conversation with the individuals involved.

• **Select in advance who your spokespersons will be during a crisis.** These individuals should handle all inquiries from the media, parents, and others in the community. Brief them about the accusations and issues and your response. Your school and district should respond with one voice about the situation. Give your spokespersons a list of anticipated questions and suggested responses.

• **Brief the entire staff.** No one who works in your school, district, or state education agency should be left to guess about what is going on. They will be hearing rumors. Don't leave them in the dark. Tell them what has occurred, what steps you are taking, who your spokespersons are, and how they can help. Ask them to refer inquiries about the situation to one of your designated spokespersons.

• **Prepare a written statement** from the principal or superintendent that can be given to people asking about the school's response to the attacks. Such a statement will likely answer most people's immediate questions.

• **Provide an open forum** where the issues can be discussed and all points of view expressed.

• **Invite the media and others into your school** so they can see for themselves what changes you are making. Provide written information for them and a "road map" so they know what they are seeing in your school. Describe how what they are seeing will lead to greater student achievement than more familiar approaches would.

• **Don't be on the defensive.** Freely respond and offer information to those requesting it. Be honest and don't stonewall. *Never say, "No comment."* Speak positively and enthusiastically about what you are doing in your school, district, or state. Show how your efforts focus on improving student learning and how the changes you are making will help you accomplish that goal.

• **Don't allow yourself to be insulted.** You do not have a responsibility to respond to outrageous accusations or personal insults. When someone is in an irrational, aggressive frame of mind, keep your emotions under control

and tactfully suggest scheduling another time to talk. Don't accuse the critic of being out of control or irrational; simply suggest that another time to talk would be helpful for a variety of reasons—for example, it would allow you to gather necessary information or have other people included in the discussion.

• **If personal safety becomes an issue, call the police immediately.** Do not attempt to handle potential violence on your own!

How to Respond to Three Specific Attack Strategies

Although every restructuring situation is unique, active opponents to restructuring tend to use three specific attack strategies:

1. They enlist people to request reams of information—such as copies of books, policies, and curriculum guides—from schools, the school board, or the state. Because public education systems are accountable to the public, many administrators assume they must fulfill requests for individual copies of information, even though doing so usually means tying up hours of employees' time. A better response is to make multiple copies of the materials available for review in a room in the school. You can invite people to look through the documents at their leisure and take notes from the materials or make copies at their own expense. (keeping in mind the limits of "fair use" of copyrighted materials defined by copyright law).

2. They bring their attacks against the schools to the media. Local newspapers, television, and radio are often used by individuals or groups to bring issues before the public. By soliciting individuals to write letters to the editor, opponents frequently create the impression that most people in the community believe the changes that have been proposed or are underway in the schools are not in the best interests of students. A kit published by an influential national organization advises, "The 'letters to the editor' section is one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper. Many influential people look to the 'letters to the editor' to sample public opinion. Your letter can influence thousands."

If you conclude that the media assault is clearly coming from an organized group trying to impose its values on the schools, take action. As the saying goes, your best defense is a good offense. Call on people in the community and state—parents, business leaders, religious leaders—who support the changes taking place in the schools. Ask *them* to write letters to the editor, speak at forums, and take other steps to voice their support.

3. They announce their intention to show up at a meeting to let school board members or state officials know "what the community wants." Educators tend to believe they should not get involved in politics. Like it or not, however, education is political. Consequently, it is important to call on people who support your school reform efforts. Ask them to come to meetings to voice their support. Make sure, however, that you have written rules or procedures for meetings. Announce them. For instance:

- Enter each speaker's name in the meeting record.
- Require speakers to step up to a microphone or lectern.
- Set time limits for speaking, and enforce them.
- Allow only residents of the community to speak, or at least allow residents of the community to speak first.
- Do not respond to comments or debate critics. Simply listen, take notes, and thank each person for commenting.

Let board members and others know there is no battle between the education system and the community, but that there are differing points of view. If you want continued support for restructuring, show that many citizens support what is happening and that the results of the reform efforts have been positive.

More Proactive Steps You Can Take

1. Set up a series of meetings to involve a broad cross-section of the community. If you are holding a large public meeting, invite comment and limit the amount of time each person may speak. Remember, lively discussion and debate about issues is a time-honored American

process by which people express opinions to those who actually vote on policies. Most often the majority opinion prevails, but policymakers must serve the best interests of society as a whole; not everyone will have all of their views supported by policymakers.

2. Invite people opposed to reform efforts to meet with you. Listen to their concerns about what they want and don't want in the public schools. It is not necessary to respond to every accusation, suggestion, and demand every time it is made. Be prepared to politely disagree with critics or to take their comments "under advisement" if common ground cannot be found. Your job is to serve the greater good, to reach agreement with the majority of the community. Sometimes not everyone can be pleased.

3. Keep focused on what your community wants in its schools, and question anything that you believe doesn't reflect your community. Ask if "national experts" are being brought in to talk to community members about what is wrong with your school reform efforts. Who is paying for them to come? Whose interests do they represent? Does this vocal group represent the interests of the minority or the majority of residents in your community or state? Share your findings with education and community leaders.

4. Open your schools. Rather than respond to each charge, invite people to see the changes you are making in the schools and how those changes are helping students. Prepare materials that clearly explain what you are doing and give people a guide so they can understand what is or will be different and what the purposes of the different approaches to teaching and learning are.

5. Don't apologize for what you are doing in your education system. Be clear that you are making changes you believe will help children learn to think clearly, solve problems, make decisions, and communicate effectively. Be clear that your community or state has decided that students should develop these skills and abilities. If you have an appeal process or a policy that allows people not to participate, however, make sure that everyone in the community is familiar with it.

7
A Closing Word

EDUCATORS WHO PROPOSE SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS have an obligation to engage and inform the public. They also have an obligation to protect schools from being manipulated by special interest groups who seek to misinform the general public or advance a narrow agenda. In this book, we suggest techniques and strategies for dealing with such organized opposition. We want to reemphasize, however, that even if no opposition exists, educators must develop ways to communicate, through a democratic process, with a wide variety of people in the community.

Without public understanding, support, and participation, restructuring efforts will be difficult, if not impossible, to initiate and maintain. Schools need the support of the community to succeed. In fact, perhaps the greatest benefit of the restructuring process is members of the community working together to improve learning for all children.

Resources on Opposition to School Change

IF YOU WANT FURTHER INFORMATION FROM THE AUTHORS, YOU MAY call Marjorie Ledell at Community Communications Consultants, (303) 797-1047, or Arleen Arnsparger at the Education Commission of the States, (303) 299-3653. Or contact the following individuals and organizations dealing with organized opposition to restructuring to order materials or ask for additional information.

American Association of School Administrators, Judy Nash or Gary Marx, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209; (703) 875-0724.

American Library Association, Judith Krug, 50 East Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; (312) 280-4222.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Barry Lynn, 812 Fenton St., Silver Spring, MD 20910; (301) 875-0737.

Communicating About Restructuring, Education Commission of the States, Publications Department, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; (303) 299-3600.

Community Coalition Network, Poppy Dennis, 991C Lomas Santa Fe Dr., #421, Solana Beach, CA 92075; (619) 792-8728.

Fritz Detweiler, Professor of Religion, Adrian College, Department of Philosophy and Religion, 315 N. Hall, Adrian, MI 49221; (517) 265-5161.

Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Steven R. Thompson, 259 Regency Ridge, Dayton, OH 45459; (513) 434-6969.

Robert Marzano, Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory, 2550 S. Parker Rd., Suite #500, Aurora, CO 80014; (303) 337-0990.

National Coalition Against Censorship, Leanne Katz, Executive Director, 275 7th Ave., New York, NY 10001; (212) 807-6222.

National Education Association, Human and Civil Rights Division, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; (202) 833-4000.

National School Boards Association, August Steinhilber, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314; (703) 838-6710.

National PTA's Guide to Extremism, The National PTA, Publications Department, 700 North Rush St., Chicago, IL 60611-2571; (312) 787-0977.

Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, Carolyn Trohowski, 801 N. Second St., Harrisburg, PA 17102; (717) 232-9996.

People for the American Way, Freedom to Learn Project, 2000 M St. N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 467-4999.

What's Left After the Right?, Janet L. Jones, Washington Education Association, 33434 8th Avenue South, Federal Way, WA 98003; (206) 941-6700.

About the Authors

Marjorie Ledell is founder and president of community Communications Consultants (CCC). CCC specializes in providing staff development for educators and policymakers, and Ledell frequently keynotes national and regional education conferences. Ledell also is the coordinator of communication and policy development for the High Success Network and serves as board of education treasurer for the Littleton Public Schools (LPS) in Littleton, Colorado.

Ledell's prior experience includes serving as education policy advisor to Colorado Governor Roy Romer. She also has held positions as a communications and policy advisor for the Education Commission of the States and manager of public relations and government affairs for Time Inc.'s cable division. In addition, she has produced and anchored her own cable television program and reported for *The Denver Post*.

Arleen Arnsparger is director of the communications division of the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Before joining ECS, she was a television and radio reporter, producer, and newscaster. She has contributed to a variety of national and local projects for public television as writer, featured performer, and host and continues to host national teleconferences for public and cable television. She is also a frequent keynote speaker and workshop presenter on communication issues. As a consultant, Arnsparger has produced video and slide programs, provided interview and media relations training for corporate executives, and designed and produced election coverage for broadcast and print media.

Ledell and Arnsparger consult with schools, districts, and state education leaders throughout the country on

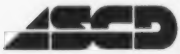
communications and education policy issues. They also serve on the National Task Force to Counteract Opposition to School Change, an initiative of the American Association of School Administrators. They co-authored *Communicating About Restructuring—A Communications Kit*. Ledell also co-authored *Policy Options to Restructure Education*. Both publications are available from ECS.

How to Deal with Community Criticism of School Change

Intent on improving student achievement, educators across the United States are proposing significant changes in the way schools educate students. Though none of these educators set out to stir up community outrage, many have done just that. The result has been increasingly steadfast community opposition to school change, with educators left floundering for an appropriate response.

In *How to Deal with Community Criticism of School Change*, Marjorie Ledell and Arleen Arnsparger provide guidelines for developing a communications strategy that will help educators talk plainly about school restructuring, build support, respond to community concerns, and work successfully with the media to distribute information. For schools already in the midst of heated controversy, the authors include specific strategies to address some of the most common kinds of attacks.

Marjorie Ledell is founder and president of Community Communications Consultants, Littleton, Colorado. **Arleen Arnsparger** is director of the communications division of the Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado.



Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

ASCD is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, international education association with headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. Founded in 1943, ASCD is committed to the mission of developing leadership for quality in education for all students.